

Mohawks on the Nile: Natives among the Canadian Voyageurs in Egypt 1884-1885 By Carl Benn

David Calverley

Volume 102, Number 2, Fall 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065586ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065586ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Calverley, D. (2010). Review of [*Mohawks on the Nile: Natives among the Canadian Voyageurs in Egypt 1884-1885* By Carl Benn]. *Ontario History*, 102(2), 241–242. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065586ar>

local administration—“cloistered and secretive” (p. 219)—could not withstand the appeal of responsible government. Thirdly, newspaper evidence convincingly demonstrates that as juries became more expensive they became increasingly unpopular. And finally, citizens believed that legally-trained legislators were well suited to introducing liberal principles that reflected the tenor of the late Victorian era. Brown weaves these themes together in a seamless narrative that is as entertaining as

it is informative. The test case jurisdictions, Nova Scotia and Upper Canada/Ontario, reflect both problems and ideas linked to local conditions, and broad themes that should be further explored in comparison with other regions, colonies and provinces. *A Trying Question* should be required reading for anyone interested in the historical administration of justice.

Lori Chambers
Lakehead University

Mohawks on the Nile: Natives among the Canadian Voyageurs in Egypt 1884-1885

By Carl Benn

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009. 280 pages. \$40.00 hardcover.
ISBN 978-1-55002-867-6 (www.dundurn.com)

Trapped in Khartoum and besieged by Muslim forces, Major-General Charles Gordon sent a desperate message to the British army requesting aid. The only route to Sudan was south along the Nile River, a trip that required an incredible expenditure of men, supplies and money. In the end it was all for naught: Gordon was killed, the Muslims captured Khartoum, and the British Empire recorded another story of English bravery.

Carl Benn has found an overlooked element of this story: the British army's deliberate recruitment of Mohawk boatmen from several Iroquois communities,

engaged to navigate the expedition southward up the Nile. Benn's purpose for writing this story is twofold. First, he wished to show that the Mohawks' contribution fell within norms of Iroquois “cultural practices, work patterns, and alliance relationships.” (p. 10) Secondly, Benn contends that aboriginal history, if it is to be comprehensive, “ought to be understood within broader settings beyond the narrower realms that tend to structure scholarly inquiry about the First Nations.” (p. 17)

Mohawks on the Nile is a bit disappointing at first, but more satisfying in its final chapters. The first three chapters recount the Mohawk



MOHAWKS on the Nile

*Natives Among the
Canadian Voyageurs in Egypt
1884-1885*

CARL BENN

recruitment in Canada, their movement to Egypt, their actions on the Nile, and their return home. Benn explains the clothing that the Mohawk were issued, and the type of rations they had. He records that the majority of the Mohawk left the expedition midway through the trip because their six-month contracts had expired. Amongst those who left at this juncture was one Louis Jackson, a crew captain whose memoir is one of Benn's major sources. Written records of what the Canadians did on the Nile are sparse, however, and each chapter allocates considerable space to detailing matters that have nothing to do with the Mohawk. In chapter one, for example, Benn devotes ten pages to how Gordon found himself contained in Khartoum. Approximately half of the third chapter details events in British-held Africa and how the Gladstone administration dealt with the loss in Sudan. Largely narrative in structure, these chapters seem a bit thin and over-extended.

Chapters four and five are much stronger, the latter particularly so. First Benn details the work traditions of the Mohawk and how their decision to take part in the Sudan expedition grew from those traditions. The argument is interesting: Long before European contact Mohawk men worked outside their villages, hunting while the women tended the fields. After Europeans entered the scene, the Mohawk trapped and paddled for fur-trading companies, acted as timber raftsmen, and later as construction workers for railways and bridges. Benn sees no cultural discontinuity in these various forms of labour, arguing that societies all over the world change and adapt to circumstances while maintaining unique elements.

Benn does an excellent job contrasting the Mohawk perception of their role in the Nile expedition with the views expressed by the non-aboriginal press and Dominion government. My research into Ojibwa

political activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shows that they believed that their long-established alliance with the British monarch still existed. Furthermore, Ojibwa leaders wanted to maintain this alliance in a very literal sense despite the many political changes that had occurred since their treaties had been signed. It would seem that the Mohawk laboured under the same belief. Taking part in the Sudan expedition reaffirmed "their allied status," and provided a potential bulwark against the restrictive Indian policies of the Dominion government. Benn quotes from contemporary newspapers that recounted the Mohawk participation as an act of loyalty, as allies of the Monarch. Benn contrasts this view with the Canadian government's attempt to cast the Mohawk as *subjects* and not allies. Allies are equals, while subjects are subordinate. It is ironic that the Mohawk, a people burdened by British imperialism, took part in an imperial campaign that was itself part of Britain's subjugation of North Africa.

Benn includes in *Mohawks on the Nile* the full text of the two major sources he used: the memoirs of Louis Jackson and James Deer. Readers are offered other smaller sources and an annotated roll of the Mohawk who took part in the Nile expedition. This material is valuable as the memoirs, Benn notes, are long out of print and difficult to find. *Mohawks on the Nile* provides interesting detail to the Sudan expedition and the British imperial story in Africa. Benn's analysis of how the Mohawk understood their role, and the Canadian government's contrasting perception, is an important part of the complex story of relations between First Nations and non-Aboriginal people in modern Canada.

David Calverley
Crescent School, Toronto